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| AUTHOR | Jancewicz, Bill; MacKenzie, Marguerite; Guanish, George; Nabinicaboo, Silas |
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ABSTRACT

The Naskapi language is unique in northern Quebec because of the Naskapi people's late contact with Europeans, their geographic isolation, and the high proportion of Naskapi speakers in their territory. For the last two decades, a language development strategy has been emerging in the community as outside language specialists have been invited to help with specific projects and growing numbers of Naskapi speakers have become involved. During this period, little progress was made by the education system to increase Naskapi literacy rates. However, the Naskapi Nation Council and Naskapi Development Corporation were committed to language maintenance. Assisted by linguists from the Summer Institute of Linguistics, their projects have included compilation of the Naskapi lexicon as the standard reference for orthography; documentation of Naskapi grammar; audiotaping of legends and oral history with a view to their eventual publication in Naskapi, French, and English; development of a system for keyboarding the Naskapi syllabic script; training for prospective Naskapi newspaper editors and radio announcers; translation of the Bible into Naskapi; and development of school curricula in Naskapi, beginning with preschool and first-grade materials. Efforts to maintain the Naskapi language will continue to require the expertise and partnership of non-Naskapi specialists and Naskapi speakers themselves. (SV)

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# Building a Community Language Development Team with Québec Naskapi

Bill Jancewicz, Marguerite MacKenzie, George Guanish, Silas Nabinicaboo

Although the Naskapi language has many features in common with other Algonquian languages spoken in northern Quebec, it is in a unique situation because of the Naskapi people's relatively late date of European contact, their geographic isolation, and the fact that, within their territory, Naskapi speakers outnumber speakers of Canada's official languages.

Historically, the vernacular word from which we derive the modern term "Naskapi" was applied to people not yet influenced by European culture. Nowadays, however, it refers specifically to the most remote Indian groups of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula (Mailhot, 1986). The Naskapi of today, who now comprise the *Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach* near Schefferville, are direct descendants of nomadic caribou hunters of the Ungava tundra region. Although they are sometimes considered a part of the larger *Innu* grouping (also referred to as *Montagnais-Naskapi* by linguists and anthropologists), the Naskapi themselves insist that they are a unique people-group. Indeed, it can be shown both linguistically and ethnographically that the Naskapi are distinct from their neighbours (Jancewicz, 1998). Although they do share many cultural and linguistic traits with the Labrador Innu, the Quebec Montagnais, and the East Cree, they also have a unique history and some distinct linguistic forms that set them apart. The Naskapi language has retained a core vocabulary not found in related languages or in neighbouring dialects, although the majority of the vocabulary and the pronunciation reflect the variety of their contacts with other language groups.

Since being resettled in the Schefferville area in 1956, the Naskapi have maintained the use of their own language for all domestic interactions in spite of an increasing level of contact with Montagnais and with speakers of Canada's two official languages, English and French. Their syllabic writing system, similar to that used by Cree and Ojibwe communities across Canada, was traditionally used for reading the Cree Bibles, prayer books, and hymnals and for a limited amount of writing.

Even though up to the early 1970s there were no formalized Naskapi language resource materials in the school or workplace, the Naskapi language remained in use in the home and church. In this respect, its situation was similar to that of other indigenous languages in northern Quebec, and the efforts which had begun to address the lack of vernacular material in other communities were to lead to change in the Naskapi situation as well (MacKenzie, 1992).

For the last two decades, a language development strategy has been emerging as the Naskapi community benefited from academic and technical resources being developed on behalf of indigenous languages. This strategy began by inviting language specialists from outside the community to provide assistance with specific projects, and it has evolved in ways that include more involvement for Naskapi speaking individuals from within the community. The process, which

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began with teacher training, now includes the creation of full-time employment opportunities in language roles for Naskapi people.

Outside language specialists first became involved in the community in a significant way with the Project for the Amerindianization of the Schools in the 1970s (MacKenzie, 1992). The implementation of this project brought linguists into a number of Quebec indigenous communities to train speakers in language teaching and linguistics. An important by-product of this project was the production of pedagogical grammars and lexicons, which assisted in the standardization of the orthographies and increased awareness of the need for local indigenous control of education. Although three Naskapi teachers from the Naskapi School participated in the project, the initial benefit to Naskapi education was limited by other factors.

In general, the Naskapi Nation Office, with its Chief and Council form of government, also carries some responsibility that directly relates to language use, for instance translation work and the sponsorship of the Naskapi Newspaper. Since its establishment, it has been the policy of the Naskapi Nation Office to implement the translation of all administrative and government documents into Naskapi, leading to the employment of full time Naskapi language professionals.

The Naskapi Development Corporation has a different mandate, which includes fostering education, improving living conditions, and encouraging and assisting in preserving the Naskapi way of life (i.e., Naskapi values and traditions). Primary objectives of the Corporation are to study and document the Naskapi language and to encourage and promote its use, along with studying and documenting Naskapi history and culture. The Development Corporation has thus become the centre for full time language development work.

The material and financial resources that are now controlled by the Naskapi themselves in the form of the Naskapi School, the Naskapi Nation Office, and the Development Corporation, have finally made the active promotion of the Naskapi language and the production of Naskapi language materials a realistic possibility in the community. Early on, the need to address the issue of language endangerment was recognized by the Naskapi leadership, and steps were taken to acquire and retain the assistance of language specialists to facilitate in the production of Naskapi language materials.

Situations have been different in other Native communities in Northern Quebec, and similar strategies have produced varying results. For example, the Amerindianization of the Schools project was able to produce an effective, self-determining Native language educational system among the Cree, largely because of an adequate number of trained Cree language professionals working in the educational system (Burnaby & MacKenzie, 1998).

Among the Naskapi, however, few teachers were trained by the project, and, until very recently, only one Naskapi actually taught the language. During a period of almost two decades, there was little or no progress made by the education system to increase the use of Naskapi as the language of instruction or to raise Naskapi literacy rates. The Naskapi School lacked the "critical mass" of

trained and motivated Naskapi language teachers and the administrative vision and willingness to maintain the Naskapi language in education.

However, in the community administrative structures outside of education, especially in the Nation Office and in the Development Corporation, this vision and willingness did exist, resulting in the development of the following key Naskapi language resources:

Naskapi lexicon. Beginning in the mid 1970s, under the auspices of the Amerindianization project, one of the authors, a linguist associated with Memorial University of Newfoundland, began making regular visits to the community for teacher training. Word lists compiled by the language teacher were incorporated into the database compiled for the parallel Cree lexicon, also under her supervision. In 1980, the Naskapi Band received funding from the provincial government, and two Naskapi men were hired to collect and write down words, under the supervision of the linguist. The Naskapi Development Corporation agreed to take over sponsorship of the project in the early 1980s, and linguists associated with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) provided valuable continuity and on-site assistance.

After years of compiling, sorting, and checking, and by enlisting the assistance of numerous specialists for technical tasks, the Naskapi Lexicon word list was computerized, revised, formatted, and published by the Development Corporation in 1994. A three volume set in Naskapi, English, and French, it is positioned to become the standard reference for orthography and spelling in the Naskapi community. As with other Amerindian languages, the community depends on the lexicon as a resource to aid in the standardization of the orthography. In most cases, standardization is an ongoing process, with changes being incorporated as knowledge of grammar increases. For Naskapi, this work continues as these volumes gain acceptance and are revised and expanded.

Naskapi Grammar. On completion of the lexicon, the team of linguists turned to the documentation of Naskapi grammar, joined by a doctoral student who completed her dissertation on aspects of Naskapi syntax (Brittain, 1999, 2001). This reference grammar is being produced in modules covering phonology, noun and verb morphology, syntax, and discourse patterns.

Naskapi legends. In 1967-68, John Peastitute, an Elder, participated in a project initiated by the Laboratoire d'anthropologie amérindienne to document on audiotape Quebec Aboriginal legends and stories. These tapes, made available to the Naskapi community in 1994 for transcription and translation, have resulted in a corpus of over 40 traditional and oral history texts. Under the direction of the linguistic team, the tapes have been transcribed and keyboarded by trained Naskapi personnel and are currently being translated and analyzed with a view to their eventual publication in Naskapi, English, and French. Morpheme-by-morpheme interlinear glossing is being carried out along with free translations that preserve the literary integrity of the originals. These stories are being made available to the Naskapi Curriculum Development Project. The decision made to have the recordings transferred to digital media because the original analog

tapes were deteriorating is an example of some of the urgent preservation issues that are being addressed by having outside language specialists involved in these projects.

Naskapi syllabics word processing. In 1988, the recently arrived field worker with SIL was asked to develop a system for keyboarding the Naskapi syllabic script. Up until this time, all Naskapi language material had been painstakingly copied by hand or typed on a special IBM Selectric typewriter. Any materials to be published had to be edited and typeset by outside specialists with little knowledge of the Naskapi language. Inevitably, errors were introduced into the texts, along with the failure to use the standard local orthography. Although Naskapi orthography is similar to East Cree, there are enough differences that a custom font and keyboarding system acceptable to the Naskapi had to be developed. By 1989, this was accomplished, and three Naskapi had been trained in the use of this system. Finally, Naskapi language material could be produced, edited, and reproduced by Naskapi people themselves on a local level using equipment on hand.

Since that time, the syllabics word processing system has been upgraded, improved, and reprogrammed to work across platforms and operating systems. Over 35 PCs and about 10 Macintosh computers are currently in use by Naskapi persons in the community, many of whom have been trained to successfully keyboard and format Naskapi literature. The current Naskapi font and keyboarding system is easy to use, integrates seamlessly into popular word processing systems, and is recognized as one of the key factors in equipping the Naskapi to develop their own language materials.

By providing this kind of technical support for the local orthography, this outside language specialist helped increase the quality of printed Naskapi, enabled a much larger quantity of material to be produced, and improved the perceived value of the language among speakers and readers.

Naskapi newspapers and radio. During the 1970s, when the negotiations for the Northeastern Quebec Agreement were underway, the Naskapi Band produced a Naskapi language newsletter that kept the community informed of progress. Since that time, the Band has had varying degrees of success maintaining their monthly publication goal for the newspaper. Over the years, the Development Corporation's linguist has been asked to provide technical assistance and training to the Band's personnel involved in the newspaper, and he has run a desktop publishing course for prospective Naskapi editors. It is still hoped that through a renewed commitment from the sponsoring organizations and securing a dedicated Naskapi editor, the Naskapi Newspaper (Tipachimoon) may become an important means of language maintenance and an important forum for Naskapi journalism.

Another important vehicle for language maintenance, local radio, is also supported by the Development Corporation. During the 15 hours of daily broadcasting, Naskapi is the only language used by announcers, continuing the tradition of oral transmission of news and information.

Naskapi Bible translation. From 1978-83, SIL linguists worked in conjunction with the Naskapi church to help translate the Bible and other materials into Naskapi. They were also invited to assist with the Naskapi lexicon. In 1988, other SIL linguists arrived to continue the work. After three years of language study and residence, work on translation and literature production recommenced. With funding received to produce a series of readers containing portions of the Gospels, a Naskapi co-translator was hired and trained in translation principles and syllabic keyboarding and editing. Published in 1995 by the Canadian Bible Society, these readers became the first published literature in the Naskapi language.

Following the completion of this project, the Naskapi translator has continued to develop his skills as a Naskapi mother-tongue language specialist, employed by the Nation full time as an administrative translator and member of the Curriculum Development and Education Committees.

Occasionally, funding is secured to hire and train additional Naskapi translators for full time translation of the Bible and other culturally and educationally relevant materials. These language workers are being equipped to confidently produce quality Naskapi language materials for the community as Naskapi mother tongue specialists.

The SIL linguist has been employed as the Naskapi Development Corporation's linguist in residence. He is responsible for co-ordinating and training Naskapi language specialists and not only acts as a liaison for the Nation, the Development Corporation, the Naskapi church, and the school, but also serves as a technical resource on language matters.

Naskapi curriculum development. In spite of the slow response of the education system to language endangerment, certain individuals within the school have taken action to maintain Naskapi language vitality. Around 1989, it was recognized that early education in the mother tongue could improve students' later achievement in English. Prior to this time, the Naskapi school followed a tacit policy of English immersion beginning as early as pre-kindergarten, even though Naskapi teachers had been trained through the Amerindianization of the Schools project. Although students were becoming marginally successful in English, those successfully literate in Naskapi were rare. In response, what was to become the Naskapi Curriculum Development Project was initiated.

Using material developed by other Native communities in Quebec as a guide, funding was secured for Naskapi language curriculum materials. In 1994, the school and Naskapi leaders set a goal of Naskapi as the language of instruction in the primary grades, a radical departure from the system whereby the Naskapi language was taught as a subject for less than one session per day. Following the establishment of a committee that included non-Naskapi specialists, Naskapi teachers, Naskapi Elders, other community members, and a pedagogical specialist, Naskapi resource persons were trained and began to produce a coherent Naskapi curriculum.

By the 1995-1996 school year, enough material was ready to conduct Pre-Kindergarten using Naskapi as the language of instruction. The goal established

by the Curriculum Development Committee was that each year an additional grade level would be added. For the school year 1997-1998, grade one was conducted in Naskapi, and objective testing determined that first grade students' ability in written Naskapi surpassed that of students entering high school who had not used this curriculum. Unfortunately, the departure of the on-site pedagogical specialist has resulted in a loss of momentum for this project.

It is obvious that if the curriculum development project is to be successful, it will take the combined efforts of Naskapi and non-Native specialists alike. The training and involvement of Naskapi persons as specialists has become a major challenge and goal of the project. Although this goal has strained the financial resources, it has helped to raise public awareness in the community that, despite language endangerment, there are mitigating steps that the community can take to maintain and develop their language.

Currently, the Naskapi curriculum development project still lacks the "critical mass" of committed individuals, trained Naskapi workers, and experienced specialists. What is needed is vision, a willingness among administrators and Naskapi educators, and the strategic distribution of financial resources to retain language and educational specialists in key roles in order to provide quality pedagogical training to Naskapi teachers and language workers.

The Naskapi community has begun to take advantage of outside resources available to indigenous communities, including consultant help from universities, Bible translation societies, anthropology laboratories, technology specialists, and pedagogical specialists in the process of developing a strategy that includes increasing Naskapi responsibility and involvement. We see this "team approach," combining outside and community level resources, as the key to sustained Naskapi language development.

**Non-Naskapi Specialists**

The Naskapi language community has clearly benefited from the efforts of non-Naskapi specialists working toward the preservation and maintenance of the language. Linguists, anthropologists, educators, and clergy have all played an important role in developing critical Naskapi language materials. They have not only produced the material, but also worked to equip the Naskapi with the abilities and skills needed to carry out this task on their own.

Although most assistance by specialists from the outside has been beneficial, clearly the most effective work has been carried out by those specialists who have had long-term involvement in the community on a personal level. These specialists have made efforts to learn to speak, read, and write the language themselves. A generalization could be made that efforts to help indigenous languages enjoy greater success when outside specialists make a commitment to the community by investing time and effort in language learning.

**Mother-Tongue Specialists**

It has been shown that, through the efforts of certain Naskapi speakers who are confident in their own literacy skills, the community has maintained a high

degree of language use in each generation up to the present. Nevertheless, it is important at this stage that Naskapi speakers continue to acquire the academic and technical skills necessary to assume more of the language related responsibilities.

The Naskapi community has greatly benefited from local leaders who possess a high degree of vernacular literacy, which is a vital ingredient in the Naskapi strategy. For 26 years, a Naskapi considered to be an authority in Naskapi reading and writing served as Chief. He assisted with the compilation and editing of the Naskapi lexicon, serves as a resource person and proofreader for Bible translation projects, and is currently employed by the curriculum development project. Naskapi community leadership has historically placed a high priority on Naskapi language matters; it is vital that this priority be maintained.

In the past, the Naskapi church played an important role in Naskapi language development. In recent years, through their interest and co-operation, the clergy resident in the community have made important contributions to Naskapi language maintenance. Since the 1990s, the church has supported Bible translation efforts, the production and use of vernacular prayer booklets, weekly distribution of printed Naskapi religious materials, and the publication of the first Naskapi hymnal. All of these were accomplished in close partnership with both the non-Naskapi and the mother-tongue specialists in the community. The success of these projects exemplifies the kind of partnerships that the authors of this paper endorse.

**Summary**

In contrast with the situations in other indigenous communities in Northern Quebec, Naskapi efforts toward vernacular literacy have been much stronger in the administrative and political sectors than in the educational sector. Unlike the Naskapi, the Cree have had better success in developing and implementing vernacular programs in their educational system, but they enjoy much less involvement by the community administrative entities. The past two decades in the Naskapi community have been marked by respectable efforts on the part of the Naskapi Nation Council and the Naskapi Development Corporation to maintain and promote the Naskapi language. At the time of this writing, six Naskapi have been trained, and they are currently employed by these two community organizations as Naskapi language professionals. But measurable progress in the Naskapi educational sector has only occurred relatively recently. The Naskapi curriculum development project made impressive progress in the late 1990s, and it is hoped that these efforts in the school will be maintained and integrated with the other community language development projects.

An important conclusion to be drawn from this case study is that efforts to maintain the Naskapi language will continue to require the expertise and partnership of non-Naskapi specialists and Naskapi speakers themselves. Only as this continued partnership is recognized and implemented can this generation of Naskapi speakers be confident that they are assuring a secure future for their language and thus for their identity.

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